



ENGINES OFF — A Thunderbirds crew chief talks with an unidentified man the day before the airshow. The F-16s flew a full show on August 12, but rain and low-hanging clouds forced an abbreviated program on Sunday, August 13.

Photo by Maj. Sally Morger

Thunderbirds attract young and old to airshow

by Maj. Sally Morger

Cries of delight rose above the roar of F-16 engines on Westover's flight line as the U. S. Air Force Thunderbirds streaked past crowds during the Great New England Airshow on August 12-13. Folks craned their necks, searched the heavens, and alternately used their fingers to plug their ears or point above as the T-birds darted through the cloudy skies.

Despite the threat of heavy rain along the eastern seaboard, clouds lifted sufficiently on Saturday, the first day of the airshow, for the Thunderbirds to perform their low altitude performance. On Sunday, bad weather moved in, forcing the pilots to perform their flat show, which requires at least five nautical miles of visibility and a minimum cloud ceiling of 1,500 feet. The low and high altitude shows require minimum ceilings of 3,500 and 8,000

feet respectively.

The good news was that the F-16s flew at all on Sunday. At 4 p.m., 30 minutes after the F-16s' take-off, the skies opened and a rain shower sent spectators running for cover. The team cut its show short by just a few maneuvers.

Weather-wise, the best days for watching the Thunderbirds proved to be Thursday, as they showed off in the sky during their arrival, and on Friday's "practice day," when the team went through its paces and "then some," much to the joy of those on and around base. Each of those days proved especially memorable for two of Westover's area reporters. Marla Goldberg of the Union News and anchorwoman Beth Carroll of WGGB-TV Channel 40 braved back-seat orientation rides in one of the T-birds' D-model two-seater.

Besides their air performances, the

team was involved with other events in Westover's military and civilian communities. On Friday, the T-birds provided the background for 10 members of the 439th Airlift Wing during their reenlistment. Later, more than 50 children with the Make-A-Wish Foundation watched the team's practice show and excitedly met with the pilots. In the afternoon, team members visited those who wouldn't be able to see the show: children at the Chicopee Boys and Girls Club, patients at the Shriners Hospital, and vets at the Holyoke Soldiers Home. Sunday afternoon, before the final Thunderbird performance, 70 active Air Force recruits took the enlistment oath in front of the F-16s, winning enthusiastic applause from the crowd.

The weekend at Westover was one of 45 stops on the Thunderbirds' 2000 schedule, which typically runs from March to November. That translates to about 210 days a year

FLIGHT LESSONS — Maj. Kevin Mastin, number 6 Thunderbird pilot, talks to 7-13-year-olds at the Chicopee Boys and Girls Club the day before the airshow.

*Photo by
Capt. James Bishop*

